Manuel Pineiro, Spymaster For Castro, Is Dead at 63

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Manuel Pineiro, the ruthless but urbane spymaster who for more than 30 years led Cuba's intelligence apparatus and directed its efforts to export revolution to the third world, died in a car crash in Havana early today, the Cuban state news agency Prensa Latina reported. He was 63.

Known as "Barba Roja," or "Red Beard," because of his chief identifying feature as a young man, Mr. Pineiro served as Cuba's main liaison and dispenser of weapons and cash to grateful and admiring Latin American guerrilla groups. His adversaries at the Central Intelligence Agency, however, regarded him as a cunning and dangerous foe, the Cuban equivalent of the East German espionage wizard Markus Wolf.

"This is the man who knew all the secrets of the Cuban Revolution and was on a first-name basis with two generations of Latin American revolutionaries and leaders," Jon Lee Anderson, the author of "Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life," said in a telephone interview from Spain today. "In conversing with him, you were very much aware that he was intimate with and an important part of the whole nether world of the cold war."

In his book "Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War," the Mexican scholar Jorge Castaneda describes Mr. Pineiro as the one figure who "more than any other personified the armed revolutionary struggle" in the Western Hemisphere. "From the very beginning of the Cuban Revolution, this man played a key role in building what became one of the most successful security agencies ever constructed," Mr. Castaneda wrote.

From 1961 until 1974, as Deputy Minister of the Interior, Mr. Pineiro was in charge of the state security apparatus that both protected Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders from assassination attempts and infiltrated spies into the Cuban exile movement here. In that post, he also supervised the establishment of the internal security organs that monitored and severely punished any sign of domestic opposition to Mr. Castro's rule.

By the mid-1970's, Mr. Pineiro had been placed in charge of the innocuously named Americas division of the international relations department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. Unofficially known as the "Ministry of Revolution," that entity supplied arms, money, intelligence, guidance and a rear base to a variety of leftist guerrilla movements in Latin America that wanted to duplicate the Cuban model.

When the Sandinista National Liberation Front overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979, its leaders privately described as indispensable the role played by Mr. Pineiro, who spent several months in Managua as an adviser to the new Government. A period of intense activity followed into the early 1980's, with Mr. Pineiro helping to organize and direct revolutionary movements in El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia and Grenada.

In recent years, with a cash-strapped Cuba intent on improving relations with the rest of Latin America in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Mr. Pineiro had become somewhat superfluous, and his activities diminished. Officially retired, he became a fixture on the Havana diplomatic party circuit, the luxuriant beard that gave him his nickname now a snowy white.

Diplomats in Havana said today that Mr. Pineiro had attended a reception at the Mexican Embassy on Wednesday and apparently lost control of the car he was driving as he returned home. Though both Cuban and foreign officials today cited unconfirmed accounts that he had suffered a heart attack, the brief official Prensa Latina report announcing his death offered no details, saying merely that he had perished "as a result of an automobile accident."